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Elena Wetmore

Trinity College

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**Teachers Perspective on Mainstreaming
Special Needs Students in Hartford**

Elena Wetmore

Trinity College

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Teachers Perspective on Mainstreaming Special Needs Students in Hartford

Introduction:

The schools in Hartford began this school year with mainstreaming all of their 3,866 (as of 2004) special needs students. In the past all of the special needs students were bussed to a few of the city's schools, but now the special needs students are going to their neighborhood schools. The goals of this mainstreaming is to give benefits to both special needs and non-special needs students. It "seeks to establish collaborative, supportive and nurturing communities of learners that are based on giving all students the services and accommodations they need to learn, as well as respecting and learning from each other's individual differences" (Maroney, 2003, 1).

My project is geared towards the teachers affected by these mainstreamed or inclusive classrooms, both special education and regular education. I want to find out what the teachers believe is beneficial and detrimental about this new school set-up. Therefore, my research question is: What do teachers at Corner Stone Elementary School (a pseudonym) perceive is happening in the classrooms and the school as a whole as the new mainstreaming program is beginning? I also want to find out: are these beliefs different for special education teachers and regular education teachers? What is the environment like? Has it changed? Are the students responding to the new classroom makeup?

The trend I have found is that special education teachers and regular education teachers do not necessarily have the same opinions on mainstreaming. The teachers I interviewed all had different views on how mainstreaming helped the students, how the administration was handling this implementation and how it should have been

implemented. Therefore, it can be said that special needs teachers tend to be more critical towards the implementation of mainstreaming in their school. Each set of teachers have different beliefs on how well inclusion is working and how it can be fixed. Mainstreaming of students can work- it is just a matter of finding the right balance between teachers and students.

By doing research on this topic, I hoped to provide more insights into the challenges of mainstreaming, at a time when more and more schools are adopting to the practice of mainstreaming. This study will provide information to administrators on factors that hinder and help these mixed classrooms. It will help board of education members decide on how to help teachers as well as students in making a smooth transition from a regular classroom setting to an inclusive one. This project can be used by teachers also to get some reassurance that they are not alone in a new realm of mainstreaming.

Mainstreaming/Inclusion:

“An inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met” (W. Stainback, 1990). The primary focus of such classrooms is how to run a class that includes and meets the needs of all students, whether they are children with disabilities, normal students or talented and gifted students. This can be accomplished only through the close working and cooperation of the special education teacher as well as the regular teacher, sometimes by working in the same classroom. Through this collaboration of ideas and teaching

strategies, a school system should build a strong learning environment, one that provides appropriate programs and educational opportunities for every student.

The movement to an inclusionary environment throughout the state is being driven by federal law (the IDEA and Section 504) which requires that schools make a significant effort to educate all children in the least restrictive environment (Lambeck, 2003). The IDEA is based on the principle that the least restrictive environment for a student is that provided in the regular education classroom. This least restrictive environment will teach all students both academic and social lessons. It is an environment that students can flourish in to the maximum extent. Many advocates of the inclusive learning environment setting defend their opinion with the principles first accepted in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. “If segregation for black children was unconstitutional, surely it will be found that segregation of children defined as disabled is also unacceptable” (S. Stainback, 4).

There are some changes to a teacher’s classroom, but some concepts stay the same. “Classroom teachers [regular teachers of inclusive settings] are expected to continue to use the existing curriculum. However, they should implement more effective delivery techniques and change instructional strategies, grouping practices, pacing, and assessment” (King). At Corner Stone Elementary School this is sometimes done by having the special education teacher and the regular teacher work together to help each student understand the new material. This type of class is considered to be co-taught, the special education teacher and the regular teacher work together, teaching and reviewing the concepts of that subject in different ways. However, it does not always work as

nicely as it is laid out here. There are arguments and disagreements at times as well as frustrations that occur because of this.

What the Sources Say:

Sailor (1986) defines mainstreaming (also known as inclusion) as “the placement of special education student in general education settings” (503). I feel that this definition is a broad description of what is going on in many school systems nationwide. This is because the term special needs is defined in many different ways as well. There are many different degrees (physically handicapped, mentally handicapped, etc.) of special needs and therefore, everyone has their own definition of that, as well. Another definition that is used in Sailor’s article is “all services and supports are provided in such a way as to benefit the maximum number of students, including those not identified for special education” (504). This definition is more specified to the needs of the students.

The trend of mainstreaming is happening all around the country because it is believed that “all children, those with and without special needs, thrive in an environment that enables them to develop what we call the functional-emotional capacities” (Greenspan, 2005, 26). That is, students’ abilities to integrate all of their capacities- cognitive, motor, language, spatial and sensory- to carry out their emotionally meaningful goals (Greenspan, 1999, 149). It is said the students should all be given the least restrictive environment to learn in. This means that students with special needs should be educated with regular education students to the greatest extent possible. This applies for academic and nonacademic parts of the school day, such as gym, music and art as well as math, science, reading and social studies.

The idea of mainstreaming has been around for several decades. An article in the *Elementary School Journal* by Ellen Kavanagh (1977) claims that mainstreaming came about in the 1960s and has progressed from there. Mainstreaming is not only about students' academics but also their social skills. She claims that in order for mainstreaming to be effective for each and every student in the school, the teachers have to be cooperative with each other, their students and the administration. Mainstreaming is an important aspect to a special needs child's education- both academic and social. Kavanagh wants students to all be in a comfortable environment, in which they can learn and prosper appropriately- the goals of mainstreaming in Connecticut.

Teachers across the nation are feeling very overwhelmed with the concept of mainstreaming. They are concerned that they are not going to be able to provide their students with the best education because they are not properly trained. An article by Kamens, Loprete and Slostad (2003) discusses an experiment that was conducted on what teachers felt they needed in order to supply their students with an extraordinary education. They found that teachers felt they needed to know more information "about the child's academic development, social/emotional growth, medical background and family history" (23). They also had other concerns that they felt needed to be addressed: the need for instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students, and support from coworkers and administrators.

Methodology:

After receiving permission by the Trinity College Institutional Review Board, I conducted my research at Corner Stone Elementary School, an inner-city public school in Hartford, Connecticut. I observed both fifth and sixth grade classrooms. These older

grades I feel were able to give me a better understanding of how teachers and students treat those with special needs. These students were not as nervous as the younger students with my presence. They were able to act themselves and not put on a show because I was in the classroom. I examined several classrooms (all with different teachers), which gave me a better feel for the assortment of mainstreaming teaching styles- when teachers had to co-teach a lesson, as well as when teachers had to teach their own lessons. I have looked separately at regular education and special education teachers.

Due to this variety of classroom observations, I have interviewed three special education teachers as well as three regular education teachers and compared their views. I have done observations in all of the classrooms of the teachers that I interview. These interviews were not necessarily conducted in any particular order- some were before the observation, some where after. My main interview questions are attached to the end of the document in Appendix A.

Corner Stone Elementary School:

As you walk into Corner Stone Elementary School you see art work hanging all over the walls, security guards wandering the hallways, and children talking with one another. The cafeteria is slightly to the right of the main entrance and the main office is directly to your side where there are always students waiting to see the principal because of behavior issues usually.

There are 2 floors of classrooms to host the 534 students in the school. These students range from grades PK to 6. These children are mostly from a minority background, 98.9% are minority. Many of the students do not speak English at home and

even more of them have parents who know very few English words. The majority of the teachers at Corner Stone Elementary School are Caucasian (only 30.6% are minority) and therefore, sometimes have a hard time relating to their students' home life. As of January 2004 there were 68 (12.5%) students that were labeled special education students, but this number has probably grown because of this new mainstreaming program.

Each classroom is set up differently. Some have a big reading corner filled with comfortable seats and tons of books. Others do not have this luxurious space. Some of the teachers have a blackboard both at the front and back of their classrooms. Others only have one. Some have only a few posters up around the room. But all of the classes that I observed had a few things in common. They all had students seated in clusters. These clusters varied from groups of three to groups of five. These clusters also all seemed to be heterogeneous academically and racially. The special education students were always spread out throughout the classroom. The teachers also all had their blinds pulled up for the sunlight to come into the classroom and keep the students awake. Each classroom also had organized spaces to keep certain books or materials so that they were readily accessible to the students.

Interpretation and Analysis:

The day to day stuff

I settle into my first class to observe two teachers (one special education and one regular education) and fifteen students. It is a sixth grade, writing class. The students are asked to take out an organizational worksheet for their writing assignment that had been started the previous day. The regular education teacher tells the class they will have ten minutes to complete it. As the class is working on this assignment the special education

teacher and the regular education teacher are circulating the room answering any questions the students might have or are checking over the already completed work. The special education teacher stops to talk to a student about their behavior, who the regular education teacher has passed by. The regular education teacher also does not stop to help the student's with special needs. She leaves that job for the special education teacher.

This method, having two teachers in the classroom at once, is called co-teaching and is used for the fifth and six grade classrooms at Corner Stone Elementary School. However, it is not used enough because the special education teachers at this school go from classroom to classroom throughout the morning. Basically there is not enough funding for more special needs teachers. The afternoon is reserved for paperwork and Parent and Placement Team meetings. This leaves the special needs students to be attended to only by the regular education teachers at various points throughout the day. The regular education teacher is then left to teach the special needs students. He or she now has to deal with their behavior outbursts, which happen often, all by his or herself, while making sure the regular education students are getting a lesson that is understandable. The teacher also has to be aware of regular education students not being hindered by the special education students.

The special education and regular education teachers should be getting together often to discuss different lesson plans that are going to be co-taught. This does not happen often at Corner Stone Elementary School, however. "We both have very busy schedules, so most of the time we meet briefly over lunch, before or after school. Sometimes it is even five minutes before the lesson," says Mrs. Griffin (a regular education teacher, 11/15/2005). A major component for co-teaching is compatibility,

which these fifth and sixth grade teams seem to have, most of the time. “We disagree a lot on how far we should go with helping a particular student,” says Mrs. Seppa (a regular education teacher, 11/9/2005). But being honest and compromising with each other helps to alleviate this tension and gets the teachers back on track to teaching the students.

When discussing the issues of mainstreaming with Ms. Griffin, she stated she felt very overwhelmed in the classroom when the special education teacher wasn't there. She finds the environment to be very stressful, especially because she was never trained for this type of atmosphere, which she thinks she should have been: “there should have been some type of workshop at the very least. Give us a crash course on how to deal with this modified environment. The only training I have had is one, small course in my undergraduate career. That doesn't go as far as I would like it to.” Teachers deserve training on how to deal with students, especially those with disorders they are not familiar with. Hartford plans many professional days, but there have not been enough of them geared towards helping teachers to cope with mainstreaming.

I noticed this apprehensive attitude one day when Mrs. Aple (a special education teacher) was twenty minutes late to the class period she was supposed to be co-teaching. Mrs. Aple was in the hallway dealing with an outburst by a different student. As I walked into the classroom Mrs. Seppa came over to me immediately to talk to me about how rude she thought it was to be left here by herself and how nerve wrecking it had been for the past twenty minutes to have to deal with helping ALL of the students, not just the ones she normally does (the regular education students). These teachers may know what certain disabilities are but they do not know how to teach a student with such a disability.

Relationships

An inclusive setting hypothetically not only provides a better means of learning the different subjects but it also provides a place to learn about peer relations. What I observed and learned during this project is that all the teachers and students, not just special education teachers or those students with special needs, learn to be understanding, respectful and sensitive to needs and problems of others especially those who are “different” in an inclusive teaching environment. I have seen several acts of kindness towards special needs students from regular education students. The regular education students typically jump at the chance to help a student in a wheelchair downstairs to the cafeteria, or to help a student with a learning disability with the work assigned to them. “The regular students are starting to feel empathy and getting an understanding of what the special needs students are all about,” says Mrs. Aple (11/10/2005). One teacher, though, was hesitant to believe that the special needs students were reaping the same benefit of these relationships. Ms. Williams believed that the special education students were not warming to the regular education students as much: “they are still very shy. But it is my hope that they start to blossom soon” (11/14/2005).

These relationships can thrive if the focus of these mainstreamed classes is on what all these students have in common and the development of the strengths of each student. Through everyday interactions friendships can be and are made, confidence is born and self esteem grows. Every single student in a classroom should be benefiting in this type of setting. The benefits of these students and teachers at Corner Stone Elementary School may not be huge, but there are small ones occurring and hopefully in the years to come they will expand.

Whole School Environment

The whole school has changed since the implementation of mainstreaming. These changes may not have been purposely put into practice at the same time, but they are working together to achieve a higher standard at the school. Corner Stone Elementary School has increased their expectations of each student. The administration wants to challenge the students. They are doing this by introducing many controls to the school. The school's bathrooms all remained locked throughout the day forcing the students to have to ask permission and gain a key to use it. The school also has stricter rules and consequences about behavior issues. The school is trying to make all of the classrooms respond to certain behavioral problems in the same way- making the school more uniform.

These changes in the school combined with mainstreaming make it appear that teachers have to really think before doing anything. "I am working harder than I ever have before in my life," says Mr. Thomas (a regular education teacher, 12/1/2005). With all that is going on in the school at this moment there seems to be chaos going through every teacher's mind, but they are doing an impressive job of not letting the students know.

Feelings of Implementation

The consensus of the teachers I have talked to has been that mainstreaming in Hartford was not implemented right or at least in the best way it could have been. Both regular education and special education teachers seem to have their own views of how mainstreaming should be brought about. The special education teachers tend to look at everything (the students, the classroom, the legal issues, and the teachers) when

discussing this, where as the regular education teachers look at employing mainstreaming in a way that would be more beneficial to themselves.

One special needs teacher, Mrs. Williams, said

The idea of inclusion is good, but the Hartford Board of Education took the pendulum too far. They needed to take their time at it instead of going full force all at once. It is not fair for the teachers or the students (11/14/2005).

The teachers do not feel prepared for this change, and they are the ones that the burden is falling upon because higher authorities do not understand the concept of mainstreaming.

The special education teachers are also worried about how the students are dealing with this change. Some of the students are not used to being in a classrooms and sitting still for huge blocks of time (like the 90 minute SFA program). “Some of the students were in self-contained classrooms that only lasted until noon everyday and now they are expected to sit still and learn until 3:30,” says Ms. White (special education teacher, 12/2/2005). A of slow transition period should have been provided for these students. This way the students could get used to the new situation in an easier manner, which in turn, many teachers believe, may cause less behavior issues in the long run. Having students move into a new school in small groups and for small increments of time may have been a solution that the Hartford school system could have used for this implementation.

There are many Individualized Education Program’s (IEP’s) that are not being followed because of the mainstreaming that the Hartford School system is implementing. An IEP is “the educational program that has been designed to meet that child's unique needs” (LDOnline). This means the students’ resources are being taken away, which is

horrible and against the law. This is causing the special needs teachers to be more stressed and disobey the rules of mainstreaming.

“About once a week, I would say, during my time in the afternoon, I pull a few special education students out of their mainstreamed classroom into another room, shut the door and work with them in a one-to-one fashion. It may not be the way mainstreaming is supposed to work, but how else am I supposed to get closer to their IEP standards?” says Mrs. Williams (11/14/2005).

Teachers are not supposed to pull a student out of a mainstreamed classroom for one-on-one help. They are supposed to provide all of their services in the mainstreamed class. If this behind doors teaching were to be found out by a person of higher authority, there could be serious consequences. But Mrs. Williams does not care. She is doing what she thinks is best for her students. One of these laws has to be broken if these policies are going to stay in place at Corner Stone Elementary School. It is up to the special education teachers mainly as to which one to break. Most of them choose the mainstreaming one because in the long run it benefits their students more- the people who need to learn and the teacher cares about most.

The regular education teachers feel that they haven't been trained properly. The chain of command for this project is not all intact because no one truly understands what should really be happening. This leads to teachers guessing at what to do and how to modify their lesson plans. “I know I should be making modification for the sped students, but I don't usually,” says Ms. White (12/2/2005). The regular education teachers are also nervous about the scores their students will get on various aptitude tests. They are the ones who are most responsible, not the special education teachers as much.

The regular education teachers are getting most of their information about making an effective inclusive classroom from the special education teachers. Every Friday the

special education teachers meet with the principal to go over different mainstreaming issues. “The administration is so confused,” states Mrs. Aple, “that they need our help in figuring out what the board of education is telling them”(11/10/2005). But why aren’t the regular education teachers involved in these meetings? Wouldn’t they benefit from them? The staff (meaning the teachers) seems to be the only support system for mainstreaming. No one else appears to know or care about helping the teachers. Many regular education teachers also encounter a tangle of discipline problems and time-draining meetings, covered with layer upon layer of paperwork (Jehlen). This is a cause for a very stressful work environment.

The Good of Mainstreaming

Don’t get any of the teachers wrong though. They love the idea of inclusion. They think there are benefits for all the students involved. The teachers also love the inclusive environment, because at the end of the day they feel even more satisfied than they had in non-mainstreamed classrooms. The only real problem the teachers see with mainstreaming is that they wish it had been done in a different manner with more supports provided for them.

When asked what their favorite environment was the teachers all said “inclusive.” They all love the rewards that go along with this type of classroom. It is exciting to see the interactions between the special education students and the regular students. “It is a great feeling at the end of the day,” says Mrs. Seppa “that is what it all boils down to: how good one feels” (11/9/2005). A first year teacher I interviewed went even further and said “I can’t picture my class without the special ed kids” (11/15/2005).

Conclusion:

Teachers all over the country are trying their best to conform to the new mainstreaming policy put forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Placing special needs students with regular students is a concept that theoretically helps all students socially and academically. Special education teachers and regular education teachers, alike, are dealing with these changes one step at a time.

The school district of Hartford, Connecticut just started this program. Their first year of mainstreaming started in September 2005 with full inclusion of every special needs student in the district. Special education teachers and regular education teachers are now being asked to work together to achieve a mainstreamed classroom with little help from the board of education or the higher authority in the individual schools, such as the principal. The evidence that I have been collected shows that special education teachers are handling the mainstreaming in their school slightly better and more analytically than the special education teachers.

The regular education teachers complain about the rush of mainstreaming. They are worried about legal issues that are being disobeyed, which causes the teachers to have to ignore rules of mainstreaming- a vicious circle. This set of teachers also worries about their students. They are nervous about how the students respond to change and how this transition to mainstreaming may affect them. The regular education teachers in my study all agreed that the Hartford Public School system needed to proceed through implementing mainstreaming in a gradual manner. With a more gradual change everyone, students and teachers, would have had an easier adjustment period and would have been less stressed.

The special education teachers worry about themselves a lot. They tend to think of how mainstreaming can be improved to ease the burden on themselves, rather than how it can be more beneficial to the students and school. They think that they should have the opportunity to work with a regular education teacher each and every time there is a special education student in the room. This is not possible at this moment in time because of the lack of funds, but it is a great idea. They are also very worried about their training. They are not trained like they should be and this worries them and makes them very uncomfortable in the classroom and nervous with their teaching strategies.

All of the teachers at Corner Stone Elementary School love working with the special education students. The students provide every teacher with a sense of accomplishment. This is what is getting the teachers through the anxiety of this new program.

If mainstreaming of the special needs students had been done more gradually, it probably would have had better results. The students needed more of an adjustment period than they were given. The first year of mainstreaming is hard. But it is believed that with time it will get easier. As a respondent in a study in 1994 stated about strategies for a classroom in mainstreamed schools:

They just come naturally.... I think that's just part of teaching... I think it's common sense... (I learned these strategies) maybe just by experience... As far as different techniques and how to get the material across, it's been trial and error. What works for the kids and what works for me (Betancourt-Smith, 1994).

It will get easier for the teachers as the program is learned more and it will be interesting to see what the Hartford School System in several years in the future.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions (these are in no specific order)

1. Is there an immediate impact because of mainstreaming? What will the future of mainstreaming be?
2. How has the school and classroom environment changed, if any, since mainstreaming has begun?
3. Is the teacher training any different now with mainstreaming than before with no mainstreaming?
4. Do you notice a difference in the classroom setting in terms of organization or behavior?
5. What benefits or harm are the students receiving from this mainstreaming?
6. Which classroom setting do you prefer- mainstreamed or non-mainstreamed? Why?
7. How is the administration supporting teachers in mainstreaming?
8. Has the overall attitude of the school changed because of mainstreaming? If so, how?
9. Has parent involvement changed at all? If so, how?
10. How has your work load and schedule changed because of mainstreaming?
11. How is the relationship between special education teachers and regular education teachers? Do they seem to work well together?
12. Are teachers trained properly for mainstreaming?
13. If you could change mainstreaming, how would you make it more effective and/or organized?
14. When conducting my interviews I also have to find out a little background about the teacher: how long has she been teaching? Where has she taught before?